

Birth of Fusion

By the end of the 1880s, Daniel Russell and other politicians saw potential for a break in the Democratic Party due to the growth of the new Populist Party. Nationwide, farmers had grown disenchanted with Democratic lawmakers whose laws were seen to favor big business and disadvantage agricultural interests. As a result, organizations developed to pressure for improvements to the plight of farmers. By 1889, Leonidas Polk had developed the Farmer's Alliance in North Carolina as a political base with members drawn from throughout the state. Membership in the Alliance was limited to whites only. Initially Alliance members sought to work through existing political parties without creating a third. The result was that the 1890 election ticket was dominated by farmers and Alliance members.

Because of the political power of the Alliance, Democratic Party leaders saw the need to incorporate many Alliance goals into their platform. Although the Democrats sought to add the farmers' suggestions to its bill of proposed reforms, none were ever fully addressed. As a result, a split developed within the Alliance, ending its effectiveness as an organization. The more radical members left the Democratic Party to form the Populist Party by the 1892 election. Members of the new Populist Party held that the Democratic Party's reforms were less than effective and that control of the state's affairs needed to be removed from the hands of bankers, big business, and attorneys.⁴

When Polk died in 1892, leadership of the Populist Party fell to Marion Butler of Sampson County who maneuvered the new party through that year's elections. Democrats and Republicans garnered more votes than the new third party, with

Democrats winning the majority of votes on a traditional platform that sought to remind voters of the fears of a return to Reconstruction should Republicans gain office. Despite an overall loss in 1892, Populists were able to elect fourteen members to the legislature. Republicans were heartened by the Populist Party's successes. Some Republicans, such as Daniel Russell, saw the emergence of a new party with a platform based in real issues as a boon to state politics since party lines could be drawn on "issues other than race and color."⁵



Senator Marion Butler
Image: Samuel A. Ashe, ed.
*Biographical History of
North Carolina*, vol. 8.

A review of the election results revealed to Russell and Butler that the Democratic Party was less than cohesive and that black votes were the lowest recorded since Reconstruction. By the 1894 election, "fusion" between the Populists and Democrats was an increasingly popular objective, designed to capitalize on the findings uncovered after the 1892 election. If the Populists could draw more farmers from the Democratic Party and the Republicans could reenergize black voters, together they would be able to defeat the Democrats. Heartened by this discovery, the two groups received further strengthening as the 1893 Democratic legislature failed to

⁴ Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 20-25; McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 387.

⁵ Jeffrey Crow and Robert Durden, *Maverick Republican*, 46.